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ABSTRACT

One of three related documents exploring the problems inherent to current high school forensic coaching, this paper explores the ethics of "overcoaching" debaters to the detriment of their critical thinking skills. The paper first discusses the harm that over-controlling students can cause, noting that when coaches develop arguments and research evidence for their students rather than teach them mainly the skills of debate, students lose the benefits of learning the life skills that debate should teach--organization, use of language, and research and critical thinking skills. The paper then discusses the harm this overcoaching also portends for the coach, in terms of his or her personal life, and the expectations of the debaters. Finally, the paper examines how such overcoaching damages the discipline as a whole by shifting the emphasis from education to competition, and some of the ways this harm can be alleviated. (HTH)

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REMOTE CONTROL

for

The National Forensic League Conference on
State of Debate - August 1985

Ruth-Ann East
April 15, 1985
North Kansas City
High School

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CS 505 428

I stood in the tabulation room of a very important invitational tournament watching the results of Lincoln-Douglas debate come in. I was particularly interested in what had happened to 27A and 27B. With bated breath, I watched as the envelope containing the results of the debate between 27B and one of her toughest opponents was opened. The envelope for 27A had already been returned and we were safe! Good girl! A 3-0 decision in her favor. She must have argued just what I told her to argue! Now, as this ballot's results were read, I was crushed! A loss? Impossible!!!! I had given her all the best arguments! We had talked for hours over exactly what to do in every possible argumentative situation. What was wrong with her? Why in the world had she lost? I left the tab room to find this student who obviously had not done her best nor had she listened in class. I knew that I had done everything in my power to help her. Why hadn't she helped herself and come through for me? When I found her, she was devastated. I asked her why she had lost. She said, "I just couldn't think. He came up with an argument that we hadn't discussed in class and I just didn't know what to do."

Are we, as coaches, too involved with the success of our students? Do we invest too much in the production and

programming of little extensions of ourselves and our own thinking processes? Do we want responsible students who function as independent, thinking human beings or do we want remote control? Perhaps more importantly, what are the goals of our activity? Are they educational or competitive? And who is to benefit most: our students or ourselves?

I usually tend to think that I am the most honest coach I know. I certainly wouldn't knowingly do anything unethical or for any purpose other than to absolutely further serious educational objectives. Of course if anything of that nature <u>is</u> being done, it must be other coaches. In my state, we always contend that these severe abuses of our discipline certainly come from "those other states" and from "those schools able to travel the national circuit." Perhaps it is at this point that we need to heed the Biblical admonition that we should find the beam in our own eye prior to pointing out the mote in the eye of our brother.

Soren Kierkegaard has said, "He who wants to present a corrective must know thoroughly what the existing weaknesses are." What is the problem we call "overcoaching?" What are some of the harms of overcoaching for the debater, the debate coach and the discipline of debate itself? What are some ways in which this harm may be alleviated?

When a coach does extensive research for the students and

develops arguments which are explained to students to be parroted in later rounds of competition, this is commonly called "overcoaching." The ethical considerations of this problem are not new. Ethical judgment becomes clouded when students are encouraged to use work which is not their own.

What happens to the debater who is the victim of an over-eager coach? When we develop arguments and research evidence for our students rather than teach them mainly the skills of debate, students lose the benefits of learning the life skills which debate should teach. Goal-setting and time management, self-discipline and self-actualization are never achieved by spoon-feeding. Organization, use of language and research skills are lost in the shuffle as the coach makes it possible for students to skip these vital steps. Critical thinking skills, information processing skills, understanding of current issues, evaluation and testing of arguments through analysis and sound spontaneous reasoning are never learned through the correct processes but are pre-digested. Carolyn Keefe says, "By relieving the team of its responsibility to conduct research on the proposition, the coach deprives the debaters of an excellent opportunity for learning ways to gather data from a wide variety of sources. Furthermore, the coach leads the debaters into pawning off his or her work as theirs. Thus the coach both shortchanges them and teaches them dishonesty."[1] So, not only do we deprive the students of the joy of learning

but we are generating negative values. These students for whom we sacrifice and slave and for whom "we would do anything" are actually being harmed by us rather than helped.

Many of us, as coaches, may really enjoy the investigative aspect of research and find that we enjoy plumbing the depths of libraries in hours of personally rewarding search and study. As personal enrichment and to "provide ourselves with the working knowledge necessary" to be an effective critic and an able coach, there should be nothing wrong with research done by the coach, for the coach, in order to be an effective coach. It is when that research is programmed into our students without benefit of teaching the students the research techniques to use for themselves that the problem of "overcoaching" appears.

Visiting the library with students and researching side-by-side showing the use of sophisticated indices, intricate periodical systems and the mysteries of the Dewey Decimal system or the Library of Congress is infinitely different than going to the library alone, finding needed information, bringing it home to the students and plugging it in. Coaches in communities where library facilities are insufficient at best, could organize field trips to libraries and/or teach students the use of the search systems of smaller libraries and how to locate information in other ways. Not all of our

students will be living in urban areas. They need to know the skills associated with research when there are greater difficulties in getting to a good library than finding a ride.

The American Forensics Association addresses the role of the coach in research in its Code of Ethics. It describes the coaching role as follows: "(1) teach research techniques; (2) provide limited examples of high quality research; (3) identify areas of research which students should pursue, and (4) provide the coach with the working knowledge necessary to function as effective critic with respect to the debate or speech topics being investigated by his/her students."[2] Walter Ulrich concurs as he states. ". . . the harm lies not in the use by debaters of evidence researched by others, but in the inappropriate use of this type of assistance, as is the case where the SOLE function of the coach becomes to research evidence, where the 'overcoaching' represents an unhealthy view towards competition, or where a coach substitutes researching for coaching."[3]

Overcoaching may cause a student to have misleading ideas about the ease with which he/she can reach a high level of proficiency. Ludwig Wittgenstein says: "A teacher may get good, even astounding, results from his pupils while he is teaching and yet not be a good teacher, because it may be that, while his pupils are directly under his

influence, he raises them to a height which is not natural to them without fostering their own capacities for work at this level, so that they immediately decline again as soon as the teacher leaves the classroom."[4] Our influence should be patterned more after Socrates than Svengali. When we get too invloved ourselves in the work our students should be doing we foster in them the prevalent societal attitude that doing as little as possible for oneself is the best way to get painlessly through life. As coaches, we must learn to know our place. Resolution # 6 from the 1984 National Developmental Conference of Forensics states this very well. "Forensic coaches must be constantly aware of the distinction between directing the activity and competing in the contests. While coaches are encouraged to demonstrate how to research, create, and develop arguments, and to provide examples of quality arguments to the students, the coach should not do the work for the student. Quality instruction emphasizes teaching the students how to master an assignment, rather than doing the assignment for them."[5]

When we do get over-involved, the students are not the only ones who suffer. The debaters of the coach who is doing too much research begin to assume that this function will be served and apply pressure for this service which will frequently be a detriment to the personal life of the coach. It is no secret that the personal life of many coaches is

strained or non-existent with just the normal complement of tournaments and the basic responsibilities of coaching and administrative tasks which accompany the type of job we hold. We do not need the added pressure of being expected to do research we really do not have time to do and still be active members of the human race outside of debate circles.

When we choose to develop arguments and research evidence for our students we lose sight of the main goal: education. By default, we make our goal competition. When the conscious decision is made to teach mainly the skills of debate, then the focus of the program is educational rather than competitive. "The accomplishment of educational value in forensics is achieved through the establishment of general and specific goals and objectives for and by forensic educators with the purpose of providing learning outcomes for forensic participants. The forensic educator is faced with decisions which have important ramifications for the accomplishment of those values which students should receive. When decisions about the program are made with specific goals in mind, the direction of the program has an educational focus."[6] When we are able to justify our programs on educational grounds, the survival of our discipline is assured. When we are not teaching students but are doing their homework for them, we cannot stand up to any scrutiny at all by our colleagues in other disciplines. Their support and respect is crucial

to our survival for many reasons. Recruitment, information sources, and understanding of needed release time are merely a few of the reasons the mutual respect is a must.

The survival of debate is in serious jeopardy if coaches must not only devise arguments and do research, but visit debaters after each round to be certain that properly coached arguments were run and to assist with pre-coaching the next round. Responsibility and independence should be absolute adjuncts of our subject. They will never be learned if we constantly hand-hold and do not allow students to go it alone. In denying students the pain of birthing an argument, we also deny them the pleasure of creativity, experimentation and the responsibilities associated with growth leading to independence. As G. K. Chesterton once stated: "Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump; you may be freeing him from being a camel." We may, in our haste to see that our students are successful extensions of our own egos, actually keep them from being students at all and prevent them from experiencing the attendant joys and responsibilities of learning.

Many of us may find with some painful introspection that we are more a part of these problems than we are a part of the solutions. We go along with practices which we think at first are questionable because "everybody else does it and my kids will suffer if I don't." The herd

mentality was ably addressed by Bertrand Russell as he stated: " . . . improvements in the sense of social obligation, as in everything else, have been largely due to solitary men whose thoughts and emotions were not subject to the domination of the herd." We need to be willing to stand up and shout with the anti-hero of NETWORK, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore" when we notice problems in our own coaching and in the coaching of others. Perhaps one of the best solutions is a raised level of consciousness about the problem of overcoaching and a sincere determination within ourselves to begin correcting it closest to home. We might consider how the words of Danish playwright Kjeld Abell apply to this problem when he said, "Of course, your youth will fight for you, but you, are you fighting for them?"

NOTES

1. Carolyn Keefe, "Debate Ethics and Morality," in INTRODUCTION TO DEBATE, edited by Carolyn Keefe, Thomas B. Harte, and Laurence E. Norton, p. 277.

2. AFA NEWSLETTER, June, 1982, p. 13.

3. Walter Ulrich, "The Ethics of Forensics: A Preliminary Inquiry," p. 14.

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, CULTURE AND VALUE.

5. Resolution # 6, The 1984 National Developmental Conference on Forensics.

6. Resolution # 1, The 1984 National Developmental Conference on Forensics.